

The increasing importance of emails

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Introduction

My first exposure to Internet-based email was in 1994 while in my final years of high school. I used Pegasus Mail running on Windows 3.1, subscribed to the Faith No More fans mailing list, and spoke with the few students at other schools that also had email. Before that I had been using bulletin board systems (BBS) and had to dial up to the relevant BBS to retrieve my messages.

At university, I was introduced to the Unix email client Pine, and it was around this time that the Internet was starting to move out of academia and towards the mainstream as the web had become easier to navigate thanks to graphical browsers such as Netscape and search engines like Lycos, Magellan, and AltaVista.

Over the years, I have seen many technologies come and go, and many different apps offering different communication alternatives arise and disappear. In the late 90s, I regularly used instant messaging on a service known as ICQ, engaged in group chats with people across the world using Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and even had video calls using CU-SeeMe. Back then, these applications were largely the realm of academics and nerds like me. The average user was largely oblivious to the coming change to the way they would communicate.

One of my earlier career steps was to migrate customers from NetWare to Windows NT, from GroupWise to Microsoft Mail and Schedule+ - two applications that went on to become part of Outlook. After that I moved into the hosting world and ran mail servers where, as a systems administrator, I took pride in how long my servers had stayed running up (343 days was my record).

No matter what job I've had across my career, email was always there. As most of my career has been customer-facing, that experience of email has evolved considerably. In the early days it was introducing people to email, then it was moving them onto a better platform, followed by making email mobile, and now helping them figure out how to get away from it.

Email has always been a big part of my life. I have a love/hate relationship with it. I don't like receiving postal letters, I don't like voicemails, and I easily forget things that are said to me in the moment. If anyone wants to communicate with me, I generally tell them the best way is to email me. When I need to remind myself or set a task, I opt more often than not to send myself an email instead of using task apps or voice assistants.



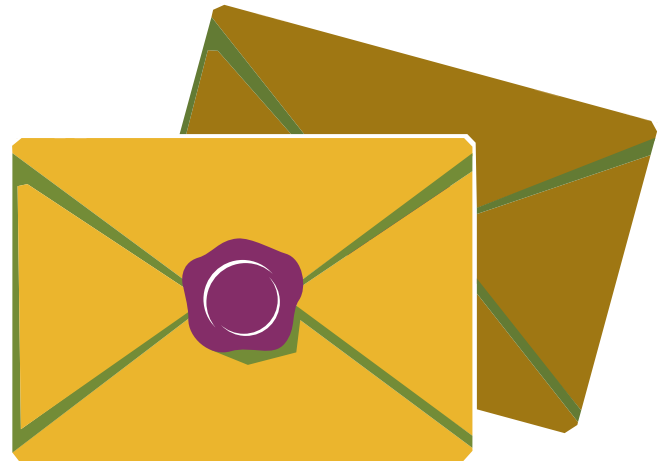
This view of me would then seem incongruent with my focus on moving people away from email. Look me up and you'll see me talking about the evils of emails, why we should be using (Microsoft-flavored) collaboration tools like Yammer, Skype for Business, and lately Microsoft Teams. This gives people the opinion that I hate email. And I do. While hate is a strong word, I do indeed despise what email has done to us as a corporate culture - we are slaves to our inbox.

It's obvious that email is not the best tool for all forms of communication, but it is the most pervasive. What is its future? Is usage and dependency on the decrease or the rise? This whitepaper aims to look at email through a clearer lens free of marketing hype or naysayers and lay out its place in the future of written communications.

The Evolution of Written Communication

The written word has been with us for thousands of years. In ancient times, cultures used hieroglyphs, and in more recent centuries, society has been based on the ability to share knowledge and communicate via the written word.

Until the last hundred years or so, the written word has largely been accessible only for those who were educated and generally in the upper echelons of society. Correspondence was thought out, considered, and often denoted as official through the use of wax seals.



In modern times, as education became more accessible, so too did the written word. As transportation became faster and reached further, correspondence became more mainstream and gave rise to postal services – delivering letters to all pockets across the world.

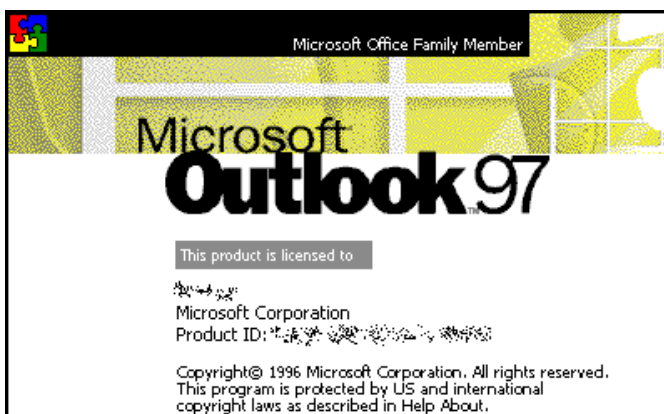
The wax seal gave way to the printed letterhead, denoting official correspondence from an individual or organization. The contents still would include handwriting and a signature.

The introduction of the typewriter increased the speed of correspondence further, but still carried with it a handwritten signature to signify that the letter was written (or at least dictated) by the person signing their name.

In the 80s, this progressed even further with the introduction of word processors, computers and printers. The fax machine also became commonplace and significantly reduced the time taken to deliver official correspondence.

In the 90s, businesses saw the rise of desktop computers, laptops, and most importantly the Internet; bringing along with it electronic mail (email). It was in this period that electronic communications became more mainstream, with email becoming more and more accessible to the world.

While broadband connectivity was still in its infancy, a common practice was to compose emails offline, dial up to the Internet provider, send any emails queued up, and download any that were waiting to be read. Users would take their time to read and craft responses before dialing back up to send & receive again.



The introduction of the always-on connection and higher speed services in the late 90s brought with it a change to how emails were sent & received. Due to this, it became more common to have a virtual conversation across the medium and to include more recipients – enter the now-overused CC field.

Popular email clients such as Pegasus Mail, Eudora, Lotus Notes, and Outlook made it easier and easier for users to communicate at a

rapid pace. In the closing years of the last millennium, email had become common, accessible, and part of our daily lives.

Email continued to evolve with free online services such as Hotmail making it easy for consumers to have private email accounts, and the introduction of enterprise mail platforms such as Exchange Server making corporate communications faster and easier.

As technology progressed, the ability to operate email platforms became significantly cheaper and within the reach of any sized business.

By not having to rely on dialing up to the Internet regularly in order to exchange messages between internal and external recipients, email became a mainstream communications tool. The average corporate user started to rely on email communications as part of their daily job, and as society progressed, so too did our reliance on email as a tool we needed to actually perform our jobs.

In more recent times, with the rise of mobile phones and ability to access emails anywhere, society has created two areas of stress that tie directly back to emails: inability to send or receive emails when there is a technical issue, and conversely receiving too many emails where we struggle to keep up with a constant stream of notifications and messages.

Email has become so pervasive that it is somewhat tolerated in the modern business world to have meeting participants staring at their laptops working through emails instead of paying attention to the meeting at hand. It has also interfered with our personal lives where we continue to send and receive emails in the evening and on weekends when we are with our families.



In modern times, when looking at cloud-based solutions like Office 365, often a business driver for its implementation is to remove on-premises server infrastructure or the need for future upgrades. The most common workload deployed out of the entire Office 365 product suite is Exchange Online - which is also usually the first migration priority. Even though other communication tools exist within the product suite such as Yammer, Skype for Business and, more recently, Microsoft Teams - email remains king.

The reality is that email has not evolved in any meaningful way since its inception. People generally know how to compose, send, reply and delete emails. New functionality is introduced into the back-end to improve how the technology works, but users still work the same way.

Written Communications in the Modern World

In recent decades, classic written correspondence such as the fax or postal letter were able to break through our busy days to get our attention. They did this because on a daily basis we didn't deal with a significant amount of written correspondence.

In an office, the fax machine would make a loud ring as an incoming transmission was received. Whoever collected the fax then placed it on the recipient's desk or in their "in tray". The same was and still is the case for written letters. Both pieces of correspondence consumed physical space, and the recipient would actually read and address them before eventually discarding them.

In current times, we receive the same types of correspondence all day every day, but as they are now electronic, they do not consume any physical space. We can quite easily ignore our ever-growing inboxes simply by switching to a different application.

Other forms of written communication have come along since email and have changed the way we live and work.



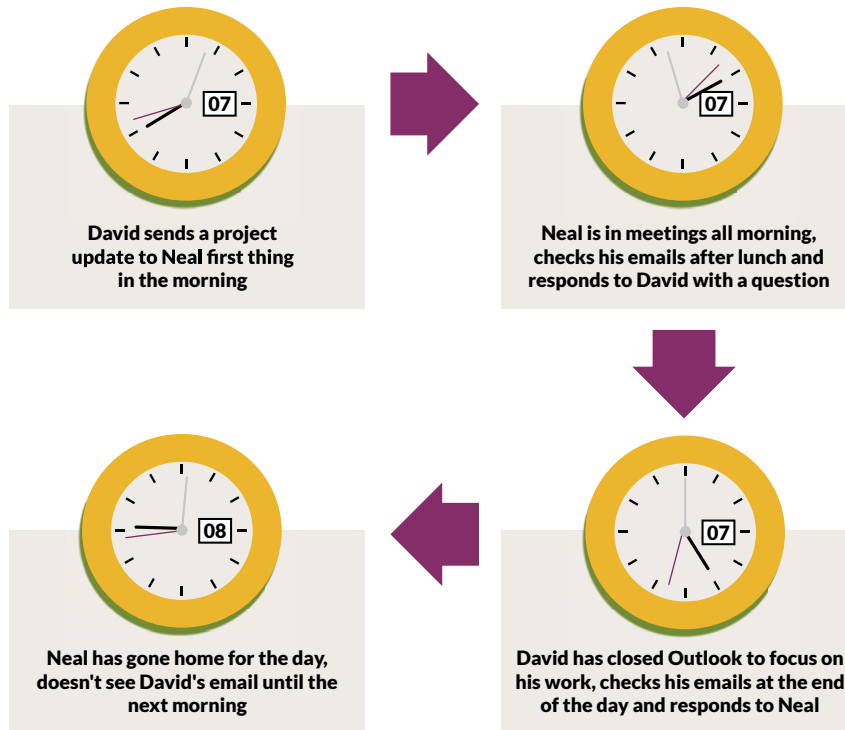
Initially, this was the Short Message Service (SMS) or, as it is more commonly referred to as, "texting". This allowed us to send short bursts of information and to effectively conduct a lightweight conversation without having to speak to each other. While generally intended for small pieces of information, texting has now become commonplace for longer term conversations due to its easy stop-start nature; allowing users to converse at a pace they are comfortable with.

In the last 10 years, we have seen the rise of social networking and chat applications that aim to broaden our audience, increase the speed of communications, as well as make the conversation more meaningful. These tools often push for a mobile-first strategy so as to allow users to communicate on-the-fly.

Even with this change, email now being available on mobile devices and able to send push notifications is still seen as a crucial tool for formal communications and correspondence, as well as subsequent conversations. On one hand, we can be reached more easily and respond anywhere – but on the other hand, we are still humans who have differing attention spans and priorities.

For many, email is seen as a conversational tool where short responses are acceptable, whereas for others it is seen as a formal correspondence tool. This is most evident in scenarios where a basic conversation can take a long period of time to occur due to different priorities and expectations.

A common example:



In this example, it has taken a full 24 hours for David and Neal to have a simple conversation.

If others were in the email thread and had replied in a conversational nature, they would have planted an email tree which would have resulted in considerably more messages for everyone to read, review and address.

If you consider that this is happening all the time, it becomes clear why people ignore their inboxes.

While we have email at our fingertips across multiple devices (and even while flying around the world), our response times for achieving meaningful outcomes have generally not improved far beyond the postal letter service.



¹Business Practices That Refuse to Die #44: Email Trees https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlqA_YKeboC

Challenges with Modern Communication

A key factor of faxes and written letters is that once they were sent, they were gone. There was no opportunity to stop them in transit to change or correct things, or even to recall the message. As such, it was crucial to ensure that the spelling, content, grammar, and formalities were in place and correct.

With modern communications, we now have the ability to recall messages if something is incorrect. Or if that functionality isn't available, we can simply re-send the corrected messages or, failing that, send through an additional message to identify the correction.

New tools have given way to faster communications, less formal correspondence, and have, as a result, decreased the quality of the message.

Organizations now can utilize tools such as Skype for Business, WhatsApp, Jabber, and others for instant messaging that also give the ability to change modalities from text-based to voice and video.



Social network and team chat tools such as Yammer, Slack, and Teams have given rise to more casual forms of conversation. While threads and groups have improved the focus of these conversations, the casual nature of them has decreased the quality of the language used.

Bots are slowly becoming accepted in conversations, allowing people to defer scheduling of meetings to an AI-powered “human interface” instead of giving the time and attention needed to do it themselves.

All of these are aimed at cutting down the time spend on communicating – which is certainly an admirable outcome – but the less time we spend on communication, the worse we get at doing it. As a result, when people switch back to sending emails, they bring with them their now-lowered standard of conversation.

Emails become brief, often lacking in context or supporting information – resulting in a back-and-forth conversation to clarify the original intention or extract additional information required.

On mobile devices, we often see disclaimers such as “Sent from mobile so excuse typos or brevity”. The sender’s choice of device to send the email from should not impact the quality or attention given to the correspondence.

All too-often social graces are ignored:

- No introduction before the recipient's name
(i.e. starting an email with "**James,**" as opposed to "**Hi James,**")
People can find this confrontational and bossy.
- No sign-off before the sender's name
(i.e. ending with "**Frank**", as opposed to "**Thanks, Frank**" or "**Regards, Frank**")
This can be seen as unappreciative or demanding.
- No introduction or sign-off at all
Just plain rude.

The reality is that we don't speak like this in real life, so why is it acceptable to do so in written form? At least in person, any miscommunication can be rapidly addressed and corrected, but when it's written, often no correction occurs at all. Instead, the recipient reads the email and conjures up a negative perception of the sender that can go on to impact working relationships.



The Future of Email

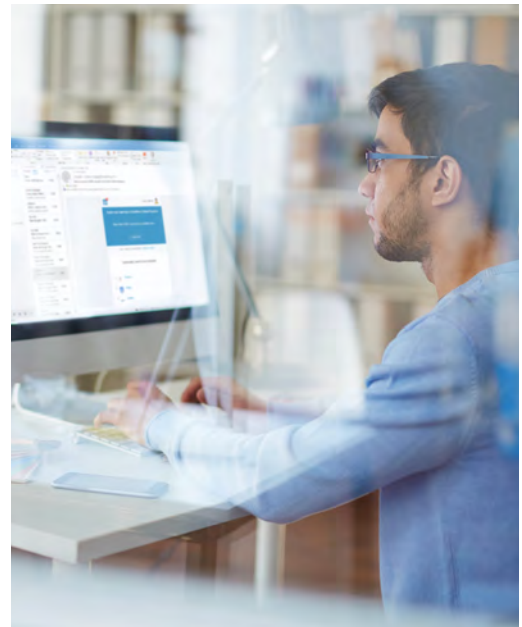
Email is pervasive. There are over 1 billion business email users in the world out of a total global count (including consumers) of over 3.7 billion users. It is expected this count will grow by 3% over 2018 and 2019, slowing down marginally with still a 2% growth across 2020 and 2021. Interestingly, with all the hype over the past decade to move to the cloud, only 50% of global mailboxes currently reside there. However, this is expected to grow to 81% by 2021.²

In 2017, the average employee received approximately 92 emails per day and in 2021, this is expected to grow to 99 per day – an average of 12 per hour, or about one every 5 minutes. Conversely, in 2017 the average employee only sent 32 emails per day, with this amount expected to drop to only 29 by 2021. While email is still expected to grow over the next few years, approximately 10% of conversations previously carried out in this medium are now conducted over instant messaging, and 20% via social networking. It is estimated that business users spend 2.5 hours per day on emails.³

Email consists of a variety of content:

- Newsletters
- Advertisements
- Personal conversations
- Spam
- Work conversations
- System notifications
- And others

Email is often seen as a noise, a distraction from our jobs. People feel that they are slaves to their inboxes. There are countless articles giving tips on how to manage email, and a plethora of tools aimed to automate the management. There is now a rise in AI capabilities to help sort and filter emails for us, based on our habits and patterns.



The problem with this is that people are seeking to manage the problem, not deal with the root cause.

People hate email, but at the same time, still rely on it to communicate.

The desire to change to different communication platforms and reduce the amount of emails is finding strong footing in many organizations.

On a positive note however, email is effectively the lowest common denominator of messaging. Virtually everyone in the business world has it, so you can be almost guaranteed the ability

²[Radicati Email Statistics Report 2017-2021 \(https://www.radicati.com/?p=14588\)](https://www.radicati.com/?p=14588)

³[Radicati Email Statistics Report 2017-2021 \(https://www.radicati.com/?p=14588\)](https://www.radicati.com/?p=14588)

to communicate between organizations using email. The reality is that email is not going anywhere for this specific reason. No other communication tool (other than the telephone) is as ubiquitous.

Combined with its prominence for being used for “chats”, as well as the rise of alternative communication methods, has led to a decrease in the quality and consistency of the correspondence delivered via email. Relationships can be damaged or even broken via email based on the interpretation of the content.

While chats and conversations will take place in other tools that suit the desired purpose, email will remain as the official and format tool for correspondence within and between organizations .

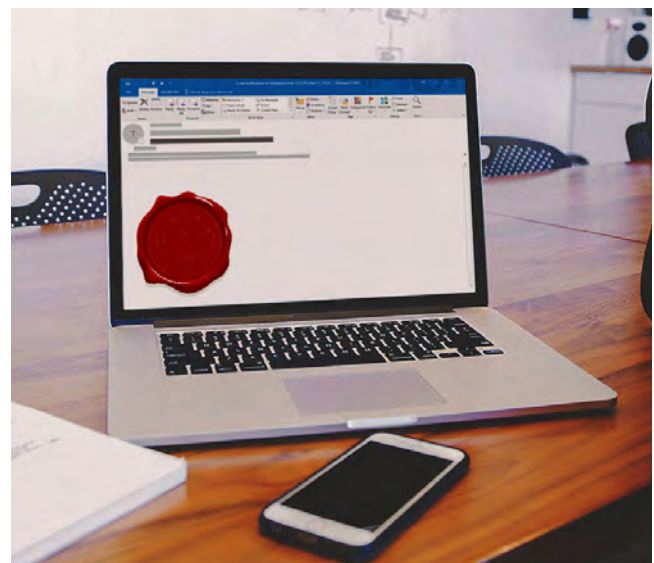
The perfect attachment to your business email

How an email comes across is a public representation of the sender and the organization. While the electronic format does not require formal letterheads and wax seals – email signatures have become the virtual equivalent.

In many organizations, users still configure email signatures themselves, often by copying them from colleagues when first starting their job role. This can lead to poor branding – especially when different signatures are used between desktop, web and mobile clients and images used do not carry over correctly. It can also result in incorrect content being displayed as users are unfamiliar with how to modify hyperlinks for email addresses copied from colleagues.

Utilizing a centralized signature allows those who are responsible for corporate branding to ensure that their organization is properly represented the “official” correspondence modality of email. It allows the organization to enforce the electronic equivalent of both letterhead and wax seal is applied to all electronic correspondence.

Solutions such as Exclaimer allow organizations with email on-premises or in the cloud to centrally control the appearance and application of emails – both internally and externally. Organizations can benefit from different signatures being applied based on rules and user attributes, such as time of day, department, recipient and other conditions. These centralized controls allow IT departments and ultimately those responsible for brand management to ensure that every email has the current messaging and brand identity, effectively the digital wax seal of approval, applied before being sent out to the world.



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